

Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers

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"The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring a thousand non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

Robert S. McNamara

air force,¹ the "progress" reports to Washington from the field written by subordinates who knew that their performance would be evaluated by their own reports²—one is easily tempted to forget the background of past history, itself not exactly a story of immaculate virtue, against which this newest episode must be seen and judged.

For secrecy—what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government—in history, tell different stories, teach different lessons to different readers. Some claim they have only now understood that Vietnam was the "logical" been with us since the beginning of outcome of the cold war or the recorded history. Truthfulness has anticomunist ideology, others that never been counted among the political this is a unique opportunity to learn virtues, and lies have always been about decision making processes in regarded as justifiable tools in political government. But most readers have by dealings. Whoever reflects on these now agreed that the basic issue raised by the Papers is deception. At any little attention has been paid, in our rate, it is obvious that this issue was uppermost in the minds of those who compiled the Pentagon Papers for *The New York Times*, and it is at least probable that this was also an issue for the team of writers who prepared the forty-seven volumes of the original study.

The famous credibility gap, which has been with us for six long years, has suddenly opened up into an abyss. The quicksand of lying statements of all sorts, deceptions as well as self-deceptions, is apt to engulf any reader who wishes to probe this material, which, unhappily, he must recognize as the infrastructure of nearly a decade of United States foreign and domestic policy.

Because of the extravagant lengths to which the commitment to non-truthfulness in politics went on the highest level of government, and because of the concomitant extent to which lying was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian—the phony body counts of the "search-and-destroy" missions, the doctored and

change facts, the ability to act, are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source, imagination.

For it is by no means a matter of course that we can say, The sun shines, when it is actually raining (the consequence of certain brain injuries is the loss of this capacity); it rather indicates that while we are well equipped for the world, sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted to it as one of its inalienable parts. We are *free* to change the world and to start something new in it. Without the mental freedom to deny or affirm existence, to say "yes" or "no"—not just to statements or propositions in order to express agreement or disagreement, but to things as they are given, beyond agreement or disagreement; to our organs of perception and cognition—no action would be possible; and action is of course the very stuff politics is made of.³

Hence, when we talk about lying, and especially about lying among the acting men, let us remember that the ability to deny in thought and word lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness; moral This active, aggressive capability of outrage, for this reason alone, is not ours is clearly different from our likely to make it disappear. The delib passive susceptibility to falling prey to erate falsehood deals with *contingent* error, illusion, the distortions of mem facts, that is, with matters which carry ory, and to whatever else can be no inherent truth within themselves, blamed on the failings of our sensual no necessity to be as they are; factual and mental apparatus.

A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new, but this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start *ab ovo*, to create *ex nihilo*. In order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed. Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we are physically located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the ability to lie, the deliberate denial of factual truth, and the capacity to do so with complete assurance, for instance, the statement that two and two make four.

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